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ABSTRACT

With five basic exercises presented in this paper as a guide, instructors and students can gain an immediate awareness of the performance and staging principles in Reader's Theatre which may be used creatively to visualize literature so that it becomes "alive" in the imagination of the readers as well as the listener. The paper begins with a discussion of selected conventions which distinguish Reader's Theatre from more typical theatrical productions and make it educationally valuable for classroom exploration. The exercises provide the foundation needed to promote further experimentation. Each exercise is framed as a working blueprint to stimulate student awareness of the basic principles of Reader's Theatre staging; to provide the primary ingredients of vocal and physical performance demands; and to stimulate initial appreciation of the mechanics involved in bringing a scripted program of selected literature "alive" in classroom performance. Exercises are entitled "Sardines Today!"; "Book Ends"; "I Beg Your Pardon, What Did You Say?"; "Vocal Traffic Jam"; and "The Body Beautiful!" (RS)

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READER'S THEATRE IN PERFORMANCE: CREATIVE CLASSROOM CONCEPTS

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Although Reader's Theatre is a part of the traditional performance studies movement which seeks to 'stage' the actions, attitudes and emotions of scripted literature as they are sketched by the author, there are a number of selected conventions which distinguish Reader's Theatre from more typical theatrical productions and make it educationally valuable for classroom exploration.

In Reader's Theatre, for example, the performer's vocal responses and physical actions are directed forward to assist the audience in visualizing what is being described in the literature. The setting, mood and other characters detailed in the literature may also be projected 'into' the audience to promote listener identification and association. In addition, performers in Reader's Theatre may play a variety of roles in the literature and are more likely to develop creative performance skills because of the various interpretations needed to suggest more than one character.

Performers may either hold their scripts or place them on reading stands. The choice depends upon the instructor's and student's discretion. Performers may stand in a line facing the audience or they may sit on stools or chairs; or there may be some combination of sitting and standing. The instructor and students are encouraged to choose the performance means by which the author's intentions may best be expressed. Performers also usually

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remain on stage throughout the performance and may have individual lines of narration or dialogue, or they may share individual lines with other performers.

Performers may wear suggestive costumes and make-up, or they may wear their own clothing. Creative expression and originality of both the instructor and the students is the key ingredient for determining what choices are available and appropriate for best expressing the meaning and feeling evoked by the literature. Classroom staging in Reader's Theatre may also include the traditional elevated stage framed by a proscenium arch at one end of he auditorium, or the staging may be as flexible as facilities permit. For example, the classroom may be arranged 'in-the-round,' 'semi-circle,' or 'three-quarter round.' Classrom staging may even include theatrical accessories like ramps, platforms, curtains, drapes or a painted 'backdrop' depicting a setting from the selected literature. There is also the opportunity to use sound, music, lighting, special effects or projections to suggest the locale depicted in the literature.

Performance Blueprint

Although the instructor cannot expect to discover a simple formula for incorporating the basic principles of Reader's Theatre into every classroom assignment, the selected exercises which follow are included to provide the foundation needed to promote further experimentation. Each of the selected exercises is framed as a working blueprint to stimulate student awareness of the basic principles of Reader's Theatre staging; to provide the primary in-

gredients of vocal and physical performance demands; and to stimulate initial appreciation of the mechanics involved in bringing a scripted program of selected literature 'alive' in classroom performance.

The instructor is encouraged to choose whatever means is available to them for subtly suggesting the author's intent; and to supplement the selected exercises that follow with active class discussion. Hopefully, what will emerge from both the discussion and the classroom performance is a creative learning atmosphere of relaxed inquiry in which Reader's Theatre principles may be 'seen' as well as 'heard.'

Exercise 1: Sardines Today!

Goals: To promote student awareness of 'poetic setting' and to encourage the dramatic visualization of suggested environmental space that might be found in literature.

Approach: Several days before class have your students search the school building for interesting nooks and crannies into which the entire class might barely fit. Have each student select and memorize a short poem or an individual stanza from a longer poem that would be appropriate for the space and literature selected. For example, Richard Lovelace's To Althea, From Prison is ideally suited for performance in a small, cramped hallway; and James Taylor's Traffic Jam is exceptional when performed in a broom closet.

On the day of the assignment, the class moves from each nook to each cranny discovered; and the students perform their literature surrounded by their classmates. The class then

re-assembles for discussion and evaluations are made concerning appropriate choices about the role that environmental space might play in the dramatic visualization of literature. The exercise may be repeated as a group project at a later time, with programs of scripted literature performed in other environmental settings that suggest the specific locale detailed in selected literature.

Exercise 2: Book Ends

Goals: To stimulate student performers to 'visualize' words and to introduce the element of pantomime into the dramatization of action suggested in literature.

Approach: Begin the exercise by dividing the class into groups of three. Present each group with a slogan, a quotation or a popular public service message. Examples might include the slogan for the airline commercial, 'Up, up and away!'; the pithy suggestion of Mark Twain that "familiarity breeds contempt, and children'; or the public service warning, 'Turn off the juice when not in use." Instruct the groups to devise a creative pantomime which makes clear the 'action' described in the material given them.

Instruct the groups to perform the pantomime without any verbal identification or suggestion. Follow each group performance with an inquiring discussion to determine if the listeners were able to visualize the words as they were suggested by the pantomime. Pay particular attention to an evaluation of the pantomime in terms of its energy, degree of suggestion, detailed 'spelling out' of the action and its overall effectiveness in

communicating the idea contained within the slogan, quotation or public service message. Now, instruct each group to surround their pantomime with the spoken text of the slogan, quotation or public service message. Reinforce the Reader's Theatre principle that in performance of literature the 'words' of the author are surrounded by the 'action' suggested.

This 'book end' approach to the exercise places one student performer in the center of the group presenting the pantomime to the accompaniment of the words spoken by the other two student performers, who are located left and right of the classroom playing area. Once the students associate the role of pantomimed action with the suggestion of the author's words, the instructor may wish to expand the exercise to include group readings of narrative prose, short stories or the drama.The 'book end' approach to visualization is especially instructive in selections like James Thurber's The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, Kenneth Grahame's Wind in the Willows, Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, Joyce Carol Oates's Bellfleur, Anne Sexton's 'Transformations' or Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace.

Exercise 3: 'I Beg Your Pardon, What Did You Say?'

Goals: To promote an awareness of the role that the voice plays in suggesting character in literature and to encourage active 'word play' in the interpretation of a character in performance.

Approach: Begin the exercise by passing out the following 'No' selection to the students. Instruct them to voice the printed word to achieve the desired meaning indicated using the vocal

variables of pitch, rate and volume; and to also relate the list to (1) specific 'character type' that comes to mind. The list is then performed individually in front of the class with the chosen type speaking in a variety of suggestive meanings.

No?	(What was that you said?)
No?	(You can't mean that, can you?)
No.	(Well, if that's the way you feel.)
No.	(I'm sorry. I forgot to do that.)
No!	(But thank you anyway.)
No!	(I'm not interested in doing that.)
No?	(How dare you!)
No.	(Does this mean it's over for us?)
No!	(We'll see about that!)
No?	(I could be persuaded.)
No.	(I absolutely refuse!)
NO?	(Are you positive?)
No.	(I just don't believe that.)

Continue the exercise by 'matching' characters in groups of two. Have the students repeat the list in the following manner: The first student's character voices the first meaning of the word and the second student's character responds with the meaning of the second word. The alternation of character responses to the desired meaning of the word continues until the list is concluded.

The exercise may be extended, however, if the instructor will present the class with a variety of short cuttings from drama that include two characters involved in a conversation that suggests a

'subtext,' or implied interaction existing beneath the surface of the spoken language, to their relationship. Examples useful for this extension of the exercise might include the 'balcony scene' in William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the 'tea scene' in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, the 'photograph scene' in Milan Stitt's The Runner Stumbles, the 'pledge of allegiance scene' in Aristophanes's Lysistrata, the 'kitchen scene' in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, the 'high school yearbook scene' in Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie or the 'seduction scene' in Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms. In this extended exercise the student performers should again use pitch, rate and volume to suggest the implied meaning of the selected dialogue, and should also concentrate on the subtlety involved in developing meaningful 'word play' with other characters.

Exercise 4: Vocal Traffic Jam

Goals: To develop a sense of dramatic imagination in the classroom performance of literature and to promote flexibility of both the voice and the body in the interpretation of literature.

Approach: Select a poem or a prose cutting of literature that contains a variety of 'sounds' which help to suggest the action of the excerpt, and have students examine the selection for possible 'vocal additins' of sound that might help a listener visualize the action being described. Each presents a written list of inherent sounds suggested in the literature and points out the

word or the line where the sound is to be found. After each student has presented a list, the class should reach a consensus opinion regarding the nature of the sound to be included in a classroom performance of the literature.

The excerpt is then scored with 'breath marks' to indicate those places in the literature where a prolonged pause might permit the addition of sound to make clear the action being described. Students may then be divided into groups to perform the literature. One student is a solo performer, pausing at the indicated breath marks, and the other students in the performance group provide the agreed upon sounds. This ensemble approach to classroom performance is then repeated by providing the students with other selections, like Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol, Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales or Herman Melville's Moby Dick, and instructing them to follow the same process of sound addition in larger groups.

Exercise 5: The Body Beautiful!

Goals: To encourage students to physicalize literature in terms of suggestive body reactions and to promote animation and energy in the dramatization of literature.

Approach: Divide the class into groups of four, labeling each group with a humorous name that corresponds to a part of the body; as, for example, the Crazy Legs, the Pin Heads, the Lazy Feet or the Sleepy Arms.

Call the members of each group to the front of the

classroom individually. Point out the need to use all parts of the body to 'react' to literature and to stimulate the listener's understanding of the action described. Then begin to call out specific 'actions' or 'bodily activities' that suggest movement, and ask the students to respond to the suggestion using their appropriate group label. For example, the Crazy Legs might be asked to respond to action words involving 'running,' 'jumping' or 'skipping'; and the Sleepy Arms might be asked to respond to bodily activities involving 'yawning,' 'stretching' or 'scratching.'

In the discussion which follows each group's efforts to physicalize the actions or bodily activities called for, the instructor should encourage students to 'recall' the degrees of tension, relaxation or movement of the individual parts of the body involved in the previous responses; and should also take special care to point out that physicalization must be as authentic and believable as the 'real' motions involved in such actions or activities. Conclude the exercise by presenting the class with a prose selection, like Joseph Conrad's The Lagoon or Dr. Zeuss's The Grinch Who Stole Christmas. Have the students first chart the possibilities to physicalize suggested actions or bodily activities and then to present the selections as part of a 'Body Beautiful Day' with an invited audience!

Summary

With these basic exercises as a guide, the instructor and the students should both gain an immediate awareness of the performance

and staging principles in Reader's Theatre which may be used creatively to visualize literature so that it becomes 'alive' in the imagination of the reader as well as the listener. What now remains is the limitless imagination necessary to visualize novels, poems, short stories, letters, newspaper articles, song lyrics, diaries or any other dramatic material which may provide an opportunity for visual or oral 're-enactment.' Indeed, the challenging aspect of Reader's Theatre now is going beyond the traditional drama playscript and to make any aspect of literature dramatic by giving it the basic characteristics associated with theatrical production.

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